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TWO WOODSMEN

BY EDITH WYATT

I

EAST and West, we in America have had a unique piece of good fortune: the poetry of our most distinguished and beautiful possession, our country's great forests, has been expressed for us by two men of genius in the sincere tones of Henry David Thoreau and John Muir.

Perhaps the most essential quality of poetry, rhymed or rhymeless, is that it be truly lived in the spirit of the singer: that it be indeed the living word. East is East and West is West. Various are the voices of these two woodsmen. But in one way, very markedly, they reveal a kindred manner: each speaks with epic swiftness of his way of life.

"I went to the woods," says Thoreau, "because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. . . . I wanted . . . to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the whole world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion."

In the pursuit of happiness by this design Thoreau started seventy years ago on an adventure originally fascinating as the story of Crusoe, and of increasing interest from an accident of history. For people feel a greater practical need of simplicity today than in the forties, or, to go only a step further back, greater than they could have felt in the age of Elizabeth. One learns with surprise that Shakespeare wrote in praise of Arden from a London of about the same

population as that of Omaha. This may give us a bird's-eye and impressionistic glimpse of the rapid multiplicity of complications. Even a foreground as near to us as that of Emerson's biographical sketches of the Concord contemporaries of Thoreau seems to show us the charm of ways beautifully wide-spaced for contemplation and reflection. Surely our own civilization is far more in want of a clearing.

Always an implement of excellent quality for this purpose, the story of Walden has now a keener edge than when it was first borrowed by the world. It will cleave through a thicker growth of superfluities and of trivial acquisitions.

"Near the end of March, 1845, I borrowed an axe and went down to the woods by Walden pond, nearest to where I intended to build my house, and began to cut down some tall arrowy white pines, still in their youth, for timber." As specific in manner as Caesar's *Gallic Wars* is Thoreau's biography of his two years in this house. None, I suppose, will deny that they were successful, and that he lived well here. "It is remarkable," he says elsewhere, "that there is little or nothing to be remembered written on the subject of getting a living; how to make getting a living not merely honest and honorable, but altogether inviting and glorious; for if *getting* a living is not so, then living is not."

Thoreau, then, got his living by planting about two acres of deserted and over-grown clearing. Here he sowed. Here he hoed and weeded. "I maintained myself thus solely by the labor of my hands, and I found that by working about six weeks in a year, I could meet all the expenses of living. The whole of my Winters, as well as of my Summers, I had free and clear for study."

Reading a little more closely, one perceives that even this amount of necessary toil is over-stated: and that he labored only in the mornings of six weeks. It would be difficult to find a more graphic record of an experience of pleasure than Thoreau's chronicle of his work in his bean field. In sheer unpretentious rhythm of physical impression it is like a series of distinguished Japanese color prints—such as this image of a bird above him: "The hawk is aerial brother of the wave which he sails over and surveys, these his perfect air-inflated wings answering to the elemental unfledged pinions of the sea."

Is it so easy, one asks then, to maintain oneself in a man-

ner inviting and glorious? And instantly one perceives that it is not, of course, so easy. To cut the knot you must not only have a sword, but be Alexander. The reason why most people could never live with this classic ease, power and simplicity is because they are not so classic, so leisurely, so powerful or simple as Thoreau.

Even bodily, most of us are of inferior make. Our senses are hopelessly slower. The stories of the acuteness of Thoreau's perceptions make one feel oneself to be a mere purblind and blundering sleep-walker through the universe. He could detect the odor of a pipe of tobacco three hundred yards away. He could find his way through the woods as rapidly at night by the evidence of his feet as with his eyesight in the daytime. He could pace sixteen rods more accurately than another man could measure them with a rod and chain. Emerson says of his companion that he saw as with a microscope: heard as with an ear-trumpet; that his memory was a photographic register of all he saw and heard; and that every fact lay in glory in his mind.

His presentation is as exact and sharp as the foot-print Crusoe found upon the beach; and it is always oriented in creation. "When first I took up my abode in the woods, that is, began to spend my nights as well as days there, which, by accident, was on Independence Day, or the Fourth of July, 1845, my house was not finished for Winter, but was merely a defense against the rain, without plastering or chimney, the walls being of rough weather-stained boards, with wide chinks, which made it cool at night. The upright, white-hewn studs and freshly planed door and window casings gave it a clean and airy look, especially in the morning. . . . To my imagination it retained throughout the day more or less of this auroral character, reminding me of a certain house on a mountain which I had visited a year before. This was an airy and unplastered cabin, fit to entertain a traveling god, and where a goddess might trail her garments. The winds which passed over my dwelling were such as sweep over the ridges of mountains, bearing the broken strains or celestial parts only, of terrestrial music. The morning wind forever blows, the poem of creation is uninterrupted; but few are the ears that hear it. Olympus is but the outside of the earth everywhere."

For Thoreau the poem of creation is indeed uninter-

rupted. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers* is calculated to make one understand that one has ears and hears not, eyes, and sees not: and has really never spent a week on earth in an appreciation of its actualities. But Thoreau not only could listen to terrestrial music, but could re-create it: and not only see, but again incarnate on the page the Inward Morning.

Brilliantly mystic and symbolic, his use of words recalls that of William Blake. Such a strength of life as startles and waylays in "Tiger, tiger, burning bright," flashes in his characteristic expression. None else could write: "The lightning is an exaggeration of the light," nor: "The bluebird carries the sky on his back," nor that most wonderful saying: "The light of the sun is but the shadow of love."

Of imagination all compact, Thoreau is one of the least explanatory, the most non-literal and humorous of authors. His humor is of the conversational type, the casual, and completely addressed to a peer and quick recipient of truth. The very voices of his visitors are conveyed with the indefinable individuality of the ease of door-step anecdote—like his description of the Canadian wood-chopper and holer of fifty posts a day, who "In physical endurance and contentment was cousin to the pine and the rock. I asked him once if he was not sometimes tired at night, after working all day; and he answered, with a sincere and serious look, 'Gorrappit, I never was tired in my life.'"

In an entertaining and brilliant literary essay, Stevenson has described Thoreau—to put it briefly—as a noble and original but cold and priggish genius. He has presented a striking but to many readers unrecognizable portrait of Thoreau's mind, as an intellect brave, but rather rigid and bumpkin-like: and has given no just impression whatever of the extraordinarily flexible strength and casual grace of Thoreau's fancy.

Stevenson himself apologizes for his injustices to Thoreau in a preface read perhaps by ten persons for a thousand who know his essay on the subject. He tells us that his monograph has aroused the fury of Dr. Japp, a sincere and learned disciple of Thoreau's, who has brought forward biographical facts in whose light Thoreau's pages, "seemingly so cold, are seen to be alive with feeling." With all honor to

Dr. Japp, those readers who, unaided by his facts, have enjoyed Thoreau's pages as being alive with feeling, on the author's own showing, will doubtless find that this explanation cannot quite account for Stevenson's view.

The reason of this is, I believe, to be found elsewhere than in the fine contribution of Dr. Japp, however gravely he insisted on its information, in the anger of his belief that Stevenson had achieved a popular misrepresentation of a great man. Stevenson was, I think, both fascinated and repelled by Thoreau because of contradictory elements in his own response to existence. Large as a human being, Stevenson could be very little as a partisan. With the most generous candor and admiration, he says that, since he was introduced to Thoreau, he has scarcely written ten sentences but his influence might somewhere be detected by a close observer. Yet, having adopted romantic statement and rhetoric as a party-cry, Stevenson could not quite refrain from disparaging utterance about an author with so constant a reference to actualities and a manner so little rhetorical as Thoreau's.

Like Sir Walter Scott, Stevenson as a Tory partisan will at times return to some of the least admirable tendencies of the faith of his fathers—in Stevenson's case a faith fostered under Elders and periodic discourse. Never was an author less a rhetor than Thoreau. He does not wish to be awe-inspiring. He never shakes his finger at you; nor attempts to overwhelm you in any way. It may be said that because of the clarity of Thoreau's style, much that it expresses could probably never be readily perceptible to anyone whose reciprocity of truth had become somewhat deafened by being roared at frequently in any resounding conventicle, religious or political or literary.

Thoreau was no imitator of himself. Life was a series of changing experiments to him. After he had proved its quality at Walden, he returned to Concord, where he made another valuable clearing, in the character of his protest against the holding of slaves. His narrative of the events of a part of this protest has the quietly reasonable air of a Frank R. Stockton fable; and seems to relate occurrences in the country of the Reformed Pirate, sitting at his knitting in Sweet Marjoram land:

I have paid no poll tax for six years. I was put into jail once

on this account. . . . The night in prison was novel and interesting enough. The prisoners in their shirt-sleeves were enjoying a chat in the evening air in the doorway when I entered. But the jailer said, "Come, boys, it is time to lock up"; and so they dispersed, and I heard the sound of their footsteps returning into the hollow apartments. My room-mate was introduced to me by the jailer, as "A first-rate fellow and a clever man." When the door was locked he showed me where to hang my hat and how to manage matters there. The rooms were white-washed once a month; and this one, at least, was the whitest, most simply furnished, and probably the neatest apartment in the town. . . .

When I came out of prison—for someone interfered, and paid that tax—I did not perceive that great changes had taken place on the common, such as he observed who went in a youth and emerged a tottering and gray-headed man: and yet a change had to my eyes come over the scene—the town and state and country—greater than any that mere time could affect. I saw yet more distinctly the State in which I lived. I saw to what extent the people among whom I lived could be trusted as good neighbors and friends; that their friendship was for summer weather only; that they did not greatly propose to do right.

I was put into jail as I was going to the shoemaker's to get a shoe which was mended. When I was let out the next morning I proceeded to finish my errand, and having put on my mended shoe, joined a huckleberry party, who were impatient to put themselves under my conduct; and in half an hour—for the horse was soon tackled—was in the midst of a huckleberry field on one of our highest hills, two miles off, and then the State was nowhere to be seen.

Thoreau is said to have inspired people with what Henry James calls the Sacred Terror. It is readily comprehensible. Quiet as they are, the words, "I saw yet more distinctly the State in which I lived" are sufficiently terrible. Few persons who have read Thoreau's opinions on the general behavior of Government, and on the fortunes of the captive and the purpose of the free, will be surprised at the depth of his concern when he says that he put a paper and pencil under his pillow, and found it of some relief to write his feelings in the dark, in his sleeplessness, on the night preceding John Brown's execution.

An English admirer of Thoreau's once remarked to me that Thoreau was not only not known in this country, in his life-time, but is not known today. So it will appear certainly to those who turn for the first time to *Civil Disobedience*,

Life Without Principle, and especially *Captain John Brown*. Full of fire and power, fused with the grip of a passion for reality, this great essay, in its lucidity and force comparable with the best of Plutarch's *Lives*, will not perhaps be widely known in our own day, in the sentimentalities of our sheep-run land. Its independent sense of truth challenges every reader, and flashes a thousand questions at his poor concurrences. It belongs to the great Outlaw letters, like the *Phaedrus*, and will be read and enjoyed doubtless for its tonic nobility and clear presentation of the souls of Supermen, when its boldness may be accounted a part of the classic style of antiquity.

However, not only in this essay but, far more significantly, by his life, Thoreau—and John Muir too—may be said to give a presentation clear and novel of the ways of Supermen abroad in creation; and valuable news of traveling gods. Like the Superman of Nietzsche's comment in two important attributes, they evince an extraordinary originality and courage: and unlike the Superman of Nietzsche's comment, they represent an extraordinary independence.

Of course the most familiar and popular idea of the Superman is very different from any of these presentments. The common notion of a Superman is that of an ordinary Hun victorious, and member of a mob. Founded in this country on a characteristic national thought,—that as an unquestioning follower on the paths of sophistication, one need not really know anything at all about Nietzsche to be a sophisticated Nietzschean,—this conception cannot fairly be described as Germanic. Though the idea of a mere gorging and predatory ruffian as a figure of supreme social value cannot find a foot-hold anywhere on the mountain peaks of Thoreau's and of John Muir's ways in creation, it can, though with considerable effort, be hauled and pushed up the cliffs walked by Nietzsche's Superman.

The most satisfactory element in this popular hero is perhaps that he does not need to be original and cannot be independent. He has to have a prey, and this is all he needs. He enhances enormously the great competitive and imitative illusion that there are no new or creative values, or, that if there are, they are of no importance, and that the only practical way to be happy and glorious is either to destroy something that someone else has got, or to take it away from him.

At bottom this predatory theory of existence is the same as the mendicant theory; and consists of a belief that determined claims upon others are the main human means of livelihood and happiness. Without entering into the question of the validity of this creed, it may be said that the most striking distinction between the philosophy of claimancy and the unformulated faith which breathes so naturally from the pages of Thoreau and John Muir, is that these express a belief in a power not claimant, nor imitative, nor predatory, nor destructive: a belief in a creative power of obtaining a livelihood and happiness from an individual grasp of the material and spiritual forces of the universe.

Thoreau, in particular, created an original happiness for himself by a deliberate design upon the universe and the future of men. A great man and a genius, he revealed in all his ways a sheer and astounding strength. As he lay near death, when unable to hold a pen himself, he dictated a reply to a friend who had inquired for his health, remarking that he supposed he had not long to live—"I may say I am enjoying existence as much as ever, and regret nothing."

Splendid are his paths, but distant. Even the opening of his wonderful way through the forest of creation is manifestly for the full-grown in mind, for an exceptional nervous power.

II

John Muir seems in many senses to set forth from nearer home, from the ground of an experience shared to some extent by thousands of people on earth today. Thoreau sought simplicity and freedom by a spontaneous desire. John Muir sought them from an early knowledge of crushing toil.

He has told us his view of drudgery for the sake of drudgery. Coming from Scotland to this country, as a little boy of about ten, he was obliged, on his father's pioneer farm-land in Wisconsin, to pour forth his strength like water. His father roused him and his brothers to feed the cattle and horses, grind the axes, and bring in wood before breakfast; and, in brighter weather, to be out in the snow, chopping and fencing by day-break. In spite of the fact that "the very best oak and hickory fuel was embarrassingly abundant, the only fire for the whole house was the kitchen stove, with a firebox about eighteen inches long and eight inches wide and deep, beneath which in the morning we found

our socks and coarse, soggy boots frozen solid. We were not allowed to start even this despicable little fire in its black box to thaw them. No, we had to squeeze our throbbing, aching, chilblained feet into them, causing greater pain than tooth-ache, and hurry out to chores. Fortunately the miserable chilblain pain began to abate as soon as the temperature of our feet approached the freezing point, enabling us in spite of hard work and hard frost to enjoy the Winter beauty—the wonderful radiance of the snow.”

Hard as the Winter was, in some respects the Summer offered greater severities. “It often seemed to me that our fierce, over-industrious way of getting the grain from the ground was too closely connected with grave-digging. The staff of life, naturally beautiful, after this suggested the grave-digger’s spade. Men and boys, and in those days even women and girls, were cut down while cutting the wheat. . . . We were all made slaves through the vice of over-industry. The same was in great part true in making hay to keep the cattle and horses through the long Winters. We were called in the morning at four o’clock and seldom got to bed before nine, making a broiling, seething day seventeen hours long loaded with heavy work.”

Nothing exempted him. When he had mumps, and could swallow no food but milk, he was obliged to work though staggering with weakness and sometimes falling down in the sheaves.

With extraordinarily little time, and no instruction, John Muir contrived in the midst of this toil to invent and make a number of original and curious devices, among them a combined hygrometer, thermometer, and barometer, and a self-setting saw-mill, the models constructed of wood, which were justifiably the wonder of the neighborhood. On the advice of a friend of the family he left home, a year after coming of age, for the purpose of exhibiting these models at the State Fair; of attempting to obtain employment by this recommendation, in a machine-shop; and of thus supporting himself while he studied in the preparatory courses and the University at Madison. He seems to have accomplished with remarkable ease the purposes he had in mind: but he says he did not complete the regular course of studies. “I wandered away on a glorious botanical and geological excursion which has lasted nearly fifty years, and is not yet completed, always

happy and free, poor and rich . . . urged on and on through endless, inspiring, Godful beauty."

John Muir's characteristic tone is epic. He sings great sweeps of space and time. Speaks continentally. Counts time in aeons. He is accredited with—more accurately, perhaps, it should be said he is accused of—that tendency to make lists and to mention specific localities which is characteristic of all genuinely epic authors, from Homer, with the catalogue of ships, to Walt Whitman, with all the lines about

House-building, measuring, sawing the boards;
Black-smithing, glass-blowing, nail-making, coopering . . .

The truth is that those of Poe's taste, who cannot like a long poem, cannot like the epic in any of its manifestations. It was not meant for them, but for those who enjoy being immersed for hours in a subject: who love to have the catalogue of ships sail on and on: love to hear the chords arising from their deeps all day at *Parsifal*: and would delight, once John Muir has revealed to them the immensities of the Yosemite, to know the names of all its waterfalls, climbing to the source of every fresh glacial fountain, and harking to the last foam-echo of the remote and all but unattainable Illilouette. Lyrics are for excursionists. Epics are for those who are keen on the trail: and enjoy the exhaustive, if not by foot, at least by fancy. For such travelers are the pages of John Muir.

His references are almost incredibly spacious. He tells us that after walking from Indiana to New Mexico with a plant press on his back, he took a Panama steamer in a certain Spring; and, on arriving at San Francisco, inquired for the nearest way out of town. "' But where do you want to go? ' asked the man to whom I had applied for this important information. ' To any place that is wild,' I said. This reply startled him. He seemed to fear I might be crazy, and therefore the sooner I was out of town the better, so he directed me to the Oakland ferry." Incommoded only by the fact that he was still weak from a fever he had caught in Florida, and by the fact that he had almost no money, he set out at once for the Sierras.

" It was the bloom-time of the year over the lowlands and coast ranges," he writes. " The landscapes of the Santa Clara Valley were fairly drenched with sunshine, all the air

was quivering with the songs of the meadow-larks: and the hills were so covered with flowers that they seemed to be painted. . . I wandered enchanted in long wavering curves, knowing by my pocket-map that Yosemite Valley lay to the East, and that I should surely find it."

So the walker's prowess sings on and on up to the Pacheco Pass, along the full-fold mountain-tops and flowering valleys; and on and on through his whole life-time.

This first Sierra Summer of his was in 1868: and nearly fifty years later, only yesterday, he described for us another part of his way over what he calls foundational truth, among the innumerable glacial splendors of Alaska: "I traced the glorious crystal wall, admiring its wonderful architecture—clusters of glittering, lance-tipped spires, bold outstanding bastions, and plain mural cliffs adorned along the top with fretted cornice and battlement, while every gorge and crevasse, groove and hollow, was filled with light, shimmering and throbbing in pale blue tones of ineffable tenderness and beauty."

Celestial was John Muir's whole journey on earth, till, "when night was drawing near, I ran down the flowery slopes exhilarated, thanking God for the gift of this great day."

When we heard that John Muir was gone, on the mountains, it was of some comfort to know that he could not be lost to the forest. Both in his deed and his word the protector of American woods, he will live immemorially in their beauty—not only in their actual and physical wonder as they rise on earth in the serried reserves of dreaming silver fir and giant redwood; but in their imagined splendor as they grow forever in the clear air of his truthful pages.

Among multitudes of men and women doing things in discontent, and because of demand or pressure, here were two men who did what they desired. A hundred acts and sayings of John Muir's and of Thoreau's might serve as a protest against the multitude of purblind, reluctant, and meaningless doings in which human energy is so poorly wasted. People cannot resist spending themselves in activities they only half like. Undoubtedly the most dangerous and weakening dissipation of life force might be found less in any drug or sport or even "strong temptation" than in the mere habit of perfunctory performances at every turn.

At least there have been for us East and West prophets of wisdom who could think greatly, and whose ideas have been incarnated in lives original, happy, and independent.

“ Really to see the sun rise or go down every day,” says Thoreau, “ so to relate ourselves to a universal fact, would preserve us sane forever. Nations! What are nations? Tartars and Huns and Chinamen. Like insects they swarm. The historian strives in vain to make them memorable. It is for want of a man that there are so many men. It is individuals that populate the world.” It may fairly be claimed that Thoreau and John Muir, like Zarathustra,—and from a different outlook,—really could see the sun rise. The whole body of their works is informed by the tremendous re-creative faculty of their vision.

A few hours in the fresh poetry and bright-blown fragrance of these men’s wonderful conception of the universe, and one finds oneself fitter both to live and to die. All around, behind and before, the horizon is wider. The vanished flocks of the wild pigeons fly again in burnished splendor over the whole sky. For a lucid interval the heart is truly awake; and can think, in the enkindling beauty of the light of that sun which is but the shadow of love, about the fortunes of the captive and the purpose of the free.

EDITH WYATT.